

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Afef Benessaïeh**, ed., *Transcultural Americas/Amériques Transculturelles*. Coll «Transferts culturels/Cultural Transfers», Ottawa: Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 2010, 261 p. 29.95 \$, ISBN 978-2-7603-0721-6.

This edited volume of 10 chapters derives from texts presented at the conference on “Canada and the Americas: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Transculturality” held at Glendon College, York University in 2008. The introductory chapter by Afef Benessaïeh is followed by a chapter in which she differentiates the concepts of multiculturalism, interculturality, and transculturality. Patrick Imbert then situates the topic of transculturality more specifically in relation to history and literature about the Americas. In the following six chapters more circumscribed aspects of transculturality are discussed. Boudreau examines “individual lived experiences of transcultural processes” (p. 71) 1) of mobility, in both migration and commuting, based on an ethnographic discussion of domestic workers in Los Angeles and 2) in a brief analysis of a(n American) globalized fear of terrorism and how it is manipulated. She concludes that transcultural competence (i.e., crudely, the ability to relate to cultural difference), derived from shared emotional experience, itself gained through mobility, is unevenly distributed, and is to be distinguished from the juxtaposing of ethnic attributes. In the next chapter Gin explores Ortiz’s (1947/1995) concept of transculturation, developed in the Cuba of the 1940s and applies it to Québec’s contemporary films and literature. This approach stresses reciprocal, not hierarchical, change in a pluricultural situation, entails an on-going process of becoming, and challenges dichotomies between monocultural contacts. He suggests there is an affinity between the challenging of European culture described by Ortiz in Cuba and the attraction of Americanness for Québécois, as an antidote to the more immediate (and more constraining) Canadianess. Côté points to the thread linking Ortiz’s transculturation and García Canclini’s (1999) more recent notion of hybridization. Pointing to commonalities within the idea of a hemispheric culture, he suggests that challenges to imperialist domination by United States culture offer a fruitful avenue for future (postmodern) development. With particular reference to Québec, van Schendel proposes a schematic contrasting two images of identity — that of the mosaic (characterized by coexistence) and that of the Métis (a new entity, resulting from on-going dialogue about differences) — which

give rise to the new focus (on Self and Other) in Americanness, with the latter having a (non-Spanish) continental referent. Siemerling and Casteel take Canada as the reference point for their exploration of comparative hemispheric American literary studies, traversing time and space to do so. Finally, in a case study of North East Argentina, Tuer illustrates how transculturality can be understood as part of the social imaginary leading to memories of “subjugation and resistance” (p. 208), revealing not acculturation but rather a “more fluid process of cultural slippage and mixing of identities and beliefs” (p. 210). Benessaïeh and Imbert conclude with a chapter on relational transculturality stressing both ongoing change and the necessity of juxtaposing the differing constituents in a never-ending process.

What exactly is “transculturality”? This fluid and evolving concept can be characterized by its challenge to the more fixed boundaries of ethnic differences within either multiculturalism (where there is the possibility of maintaining difference within implicit parameters of power) or interculturality (where there is an explicit, common (linguistic) reference point to which all must conform while maintaining their other differences), and to the assumption of difference from, rather than the creation of, a new, possibly hybrid (although perhaps even that is too fixed) identity. Contextualization in time and space is assumed — but in fairness, that is not excluded by all versions of multiculturalism and interculturality. Furthermore, as Benessaïeh and Imbert acknowledge in their conclusion, the authors of the collection, drawing from their diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary backgrounds and intellectual sources of inspiration, have defined “transculturality” in various ways. Equally, however, they share a common emphasis on fluidity and context. Speaking as a bilingual Canadian sociologist with a background in ethnic relations in Canada, Québec, and the Commonwealth Caribbean, is this new concept a useful addition to our conceptual arsenal, reflective of emerging realities and dissolving boundaries in a globalizing world? I am not sure — much of the literature cited is unfamiliar to me and would first merit careful study. Certainly this collection opens new avenues of exploration for Canadian sociologists, particularly for those less familiar with postmodern approaches to diversity, especially those found within cultural studies.

In addition to its focus on transculturality (as distinct from the more familiar (for Anglophones) multiculturalism and (for Francophones) interculturality, this work brings new light to *CJS* readers through its interest in Americanness, which is probably a less well known concept for Anglophone (and Canadian) sociologists than for those in cultural studies, literatures, and interdisciplinary studies in urbanism (for instance), as well as those with a particular interest in Latin America. Although America-

nity is more comprehensive than that which emanates from the United States, Anglophone Canadians may be particularly reticent about being enveloped by the United States, as Siemerling and Castreel note in their chapter, and therefore be critical of the ambiguity of “Americanity” itself: is its referent the United States (as seems implicitly to be the case in some articles), or North America (with or without Mexico) or the hemispheres of the Americas (with or without the Caribbean) — which is what I understand the term to mean? Interestingly Siemerling and Castreel were also the only authors to refer to the Canadianization concerns (with both Great Britain and the United States) which were so present in the latter part of the 20th century within academic Anglophone Canada: in some of the other articles this historical period is absent, although the constraints by Anglophones on Francophone Québec are examined. Perhaps consistent with the book’s focus, neither minority Francophones nor non-British cultures are analyzed for Canada /Québec, and attention to power relations is more attenuated than a sociologist might expect. I also regretted that the intellectual contribution from the British West Indies to the study of ethnic relations seems to be largely absent from the referents of the authors in this collection, despite its importance in early challenges to dominant American notions of assimilation: there are, I think, potential complementarities between this work and that of Ortiz and García Canclini.

I would hope that *CJS* readers will be willing and able to meet the linguistic challenge of reading articles in both English and French, since both provide valuable insights into the canon, assumptions, and history from which the authors in this book are building and one would be the poorer if only exposed to the ideas of half of the authors. A further challenge is that, as an outsider to some of the disciplines and interdisciplinary fields, I acknowledge difficulties in my grasp of the authors’ allusions and analytic tools, but I also want to underline the beneficial returns that can result from remedying this: since the articles form a coherent whole, some of this invaluable contextualization occurred through my complete reading of *Transcultural Americas/Amériques Transculturelles*.

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